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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled, "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child**

## Statement submitted by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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## Statement

## Promises made

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantee girls the right to education. In 1990 governments meeting in Jomtien, promised Education for All and gender equality in education by 2015, a commitment reaffirmed with particular emphasis on girls' education, by the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action. Those promises were repeated in the Millennium Declaration when world leaders agreed to end gender disparity in education and to empower women.

In the Beijing Declaration, governments meeting at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women recommitted themselves to ensuring the full implementation of the human rights of women and girls including equal access and treatment in education.[i] In Section L of the Beijing Platform for Action they promised to end discrimination against the girl child—to ensure universal and equal access to education for all girls by allocating appropriate budgetary resources, by enlisting the support of the community; and by developing training programmes and materials for teachers and educators, with a view to providing them with effective strategies for gender-sensitive teaching.[ii]

Despite guarantees enshrined in international law and the oft-repeated commitment to education for all, girls continue to be denied the full enjoyment of their right to education. Notwithstanding international consensus on the importance of improving gender parity and equality in education, sex discrimination in education remains a persistent problem. Recent progress is far too slow to achieve full gender parity and equality by 2015.

Progress slow

While many countries have made significant progress in education, girls still account for 57% of the 77 million out-of-school children world-wide.[iii] Of countries with 2004 data available, only about two-thirds have achieved gender parity at the primary level. Only one-third of countries reporting on secondary education have achieved parity and only five countries for which data are available have achieved parity at the tertiary level.[iv]

Girls continue to be locked out of school and locked into inequality. Barriers to quality education include poverty, child labour, child trafficking, HIV/AIDS, remote location, inadequate infrastructure, mother's lack of education, civil conflict, discrimination, and violence.

Furthermore, the poor-quality education, resulting from irrelevant and obsolete curricula, overcrowded classrooms, unsafe schools, untrained teachers, and gender discrimination, cause high

dropout and repetition rates among girls.[v] When girls are left behind not only are their rights violated, but the cascading benefits of girls' education are lost.

Girls' education matters

Over the course of the last decade academics, development practitioners, girls' advocates, and government ministers have pointed to the important benefits of girls' education. Former Secretary-General Kofi Annan repeatedly addressed its significance.

> If we are to succeed in our efforts to build a healthier, more peaceful and equitable world, classrooms must be full of girls as well as boys. By educating girls, we will help raise economic productivity and reduce both maternal and infant mortality. By educating girls, we will improve nutrition, promote health, and fight HIV/AIDS. By educating girls, we will trigger a transformation of society as a whole—social, economic, and political.[vi]

Research has shown:

- Education expands a girl's options and offers her resources for development;[vii]
- While education for both boys and girls leads to increased income for individuals and nations, the education of girls leads to greater gains;
- Educated women have smaller, healthier, and better educated families;
- Educated girls are less likely to fall victim to HIV/AIDS, trafficking, early marriage, and various other forms of violence;
- Increased education is one of the most important tools to empower girls within the family and society. As that happens, they not only increase their own agency but improve the well-being of their families and help to transform their communities.[viii]

Quality matters

However, research shows that providing access to education is insufficient. Girls must have access to quality education that not only promotes understanding, tolerance, and respect for human rights, but also develops knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for girls to participate effectively in society.

While no single model is appropriate for all, and education must always fit local and national contexts, research has uncovered elements which help to ensure quality education that promotes gender equality. These include:

- Teachers, especially female, with proper and continuous training, who encourage active, participatory learning by all students;[ix]

- Curriculum and materials relevant to national and local needs, grounded in students' own culture, and free of gender bias and stereotypes;
- Local control of education in which parents—mothers and fathers—are given an explicit role in holding schools and teachers accountable for delivering results;[x]
- Flexible instruction modes, including alternative delivery formats, classroom hours, and content, so as to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable girls;[xi]
- Transparent school management that is accountable to stakeholders and constituents and capable of monitoring and evaluating school performance and girls' achievement;[xii]
- Dependable educational funding that ensures adequate education infrastructure, materials, and personnel and specifically targets girls.[xiii]

Recommendations

Rapid progress toward ending discrimination and achieving equality in education can be made if governments and their citizens will:

1. Improve quality by undertaking the systemic reform of education including:
   - Creating rights-based, gender-sensitive curricula, infrastructure, and pedagogy;
   - Ensuring that girls are safe from all forms of violence and intimidation in all educational settings.
2. Mobilize the political will necessary to ensure quality education for all girls:
   - Create a national and international ethos that identifies the importance and value of educating girls;
   - Make the education of girls a priority; recognizing girls' right to education and the key role it plays in the accomplishment of all the promises of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and Millennium Development Goals.
3. Develop comprehensive national education strategies that:
   - Target the special needs of girls, especially disadvantaged and vulnerable girls;
   - Prioritize girls' education in all development plans and poverty reduction strategies.
4. Mobilize national and international resources for girls' education.
   - Encourage developing nations to increase national funding for basic education and to specifically target education for girls, especially disadvantaged and vulnerable girls.
   - Insist that donor nations demonstrate their political and financial commitment to education for girls by canceling the onerous debt of impoverished countries and increasing donor aid for girls' education.
   - Support the efforts of non-governmental organizations' to:

- Educate civil society about the importance of girls' education;
- Eliminate cultural taboos and traditional practices that keep girls from exercising their right to education;
- Develop creative formal and non-formal education programs to meet the needs of girls, especially those most marginalized.

Conclusions

Governments are responsible for the goals they have set for girls' education. Non-Governmental Organizations have long been a force in promoting and delivering education, especially to those most vulnerable and neglected. They must continue to work with national governments, local communities, and UN agencies to build educational capacity. Finally, it is the responsibility of women, men, girls and boys, everywhere to mobilize political will to meet the commitments made to ensure gender equality in education.

"My dream is to become a doctor. But dreams remain dreams. I am in class five and have to leave now. School is only free up to this year. I think my father will marry me off in the near future because I'll be finished with school and have little to do. This thought frightens me. I hope someone hears my cry and comes forward before my education is stopped." Jasmine, 13, from Bangladesh[xiv]

*Note*:

Statement endorsed and supported by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council: Armenian Relief Society, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Congregations of St. Joseph, Dominican Leadership Conference, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas, FEMVISION, Fraternité Notre Dame, Grail, International Council of Jewish Women, International Federation for Home Economics, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation, League of Women Voters of the United States, Loretto Community, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, SOS Kinderdorf International, UNANIMA International, United Methodist Church General Board of Church and Society, United Church of Christ Board for World Ministries, Virginia Gildersleeve International Fund, World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, World Movement of Mothers and Zonta International.

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[i] Beijing Declaration, 27, 30.

[ii] Platform for Action, 279.

[iii] EFA Global Monitoring Team, Education for All: Strong Foundation Early Childhood Care and Education 2007, (Paris: UNESCO) 29.

[iv] EFA 2007, 4.

[v] UNESCO, http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/

[vi] Secretary-General, Gender Parity in Education (Washington, DC, 2 March 2005).

[vii] Eileen Kane, Girls' Education in Africa: What Do We Know About Strategies that Work, (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004), 2.

[viii] Barbara Herz and Gene B. Sperling, What Works in Girls' Education: Executive Summary (NY: Council on Foreign Relations, 2004), 3-6.

[ix] Teach a Child Transform A Nation (Washington, DC: The Basic Education Coalition, 2004), 3.

[x] The UN Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, Toward Universal Primary Education (NY: UN Millennium Project, 2005), 77.

[xi] Teach a Child, 3.

[xii] Ibid.

[xiii] Ibid.

[xiv] UNICEF, Voices of Youth.